

“Living Deliciously: Satanic Feminist Subversion in *The Witch*”

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Gender/
Cultural Studies

Simmons College, Boston, Massachusetts
May 1st 2018

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For Lilith -- my Cosmic Mother, inspiration, and breath.

In Robert Egger's film *The Witch* (2015), a 1630s Christian family — father William, mother Katherine, and five children (Thomasin, Caleb, twins Jonas and Mercy, and infant Samuel) — becomes excommunicated from their plantation for religious extremism, only to become increasingly deranged and victimized by supernatural forces following their isolation in the New England wilderness. First, Samuel disappears — or as the audience becomes aware of, is kidnapped by a witch and used for a transvection ritual — during the eldest Thomasin's watch, which sparks a slow and increasing suspicion of Thomasin, fear of witchcraft, and an onslaught of madness. As family members die one by one, they are taunted by curses and visions, despair, and imagery of witches, magic, daemons, and the abject, until only Thomasin is left. With Thomasin alone, she seeks out the family goat, Black Phillip, who communicates with her, and asks her if she would like to experience freedom, see the world, and “live deliciously.” Thomasin signs Black Phillip's book, walks naked into the woods with him where she arrives at a ritualistic scene in which several naked and wild crones are chanting in an unintelligible language and writhing around a fire. As the witches begin to levitate into the air, so does Thomasin, still covered in blood, laughing at her newfound powers and freedom.

The Witch showcases the juxtapositions of religious extremism and the supernatural, order and chaos, the subservient woman and the monstrous witch, obedience and rebellion. Within these contrasting motifs, Thomasin is caught in the middle throughout the film; Thomasin is the only member of her family not to be harmed by the witch, Black Phillip, or other supernatural forces, which begs the question, why is she spared? Furthermore, once she breaks free from both her father, and from God, and signs Black Phillip's book, it must be considered whether ownership of Thomasin is transferred from one patriarch to another, or if her

transformation into a witch completely subverts both the patriarchy and her subservience to anyone. Is Black Phillip/Satan the liberator of, or the giver of magical powers to, women? Weaving in folklore, mythology, and religious studies into my analysis, I argue that viewing Satan as the inverse of God, and witches as the monstrous side of women, is a patriarchal trap in which identities and power structures are replicated and reproduced through hegemonic patriarchal understandings and beliefs. Instead, I hope to position the figure of the Witch as a transcendent being free from the bounds of the patriarchal symbolic order.

To fully understand what happens to Thomasin, and what this might mean, it is important to first contextualize the figure of the Witch. Often known as the crone, the hag, the woman with supernatural powers or gruesome features, figures such as Medusa, Baba Yaga, and Ursula the Sea Witch all fit this designation. The creation of the Witch as not only supernatural and fearsome, but also as demonic, can be seen through examination of religious myth, such as Eve in Genesis 3 as well as Lilith folklore. As Kristen J Sollee states in her book *Witches, Sluts, and Feminists*, “The witch is at once female divinity, female ferocity, and female transgression” (Solee 15). For the purpose of this thesis, the religious aspect to the demonization and bothering of Woman will be examined, as well as the fact that the witch is a medium for cultural insecurities, fears, and ideals about women. Fierceness, independence, perversion, rebellion against authority and patriarchy are all traits the stereotype of the Witch embodies, as well as traits that women and others in the material world become demonized and punished for exhibiting. Monstrosity is a tool of creating an “othered” subject in relation to the hegemonic status quo — through analyzing the demonization of monstrous subjects within the medium of film, the heteropatriarchal supremacy of the material world can be examined.

CONDEMNATION & PRAISE: CONTRASTING INTERPRETATIONS OF *THE WITCH*

In the overall popular culture reception of *The Witch*, stark differences can be observed in both the reception and meaning-making of the film. Numerous critics have tended to view the film as a period piece of 1630's New England, or position it as a psychological horror story about societal isolation. The Guardian frames the monsters in this film as a "demonic goat" and shapeshifting hares that "call this fracturing family into madness," while also describing this film as an illustration of the "demons (that) lurk largely within the mind" (Godfrey 5). Youtube reviews highlight fan theories of the family's descent into madness as being hallucinatory, resulting from ergot in the family's rotting corn crops. The New York Times describes *The Witch* as an "American story about a catastrophe of faith" (Dargis 5).

On religious blogs, Christians have chimed in as describing *The Witch* as a film that "perfectly captured the depth of depravity of Satanism" (Christian Answers 7). Another blogger noted "The Witch has a strong occult worldview with incredibly strong anti-Christian elements and extreme pagan undertones...The Witch is a strong candidate for the most offensive movie of 2016" (Christian Answers 12). A website called Think Christian warned potential viewers that this film is officially endorsed by the Satanic Temple, yet that should not necessarily scare religious moviegoers from viewing the film, as *The Witch* is "a provocative consideration of the ways religious extremists may be particularly susceptible to the devil's whims" (Larsen 1).

In contrast, The Satanic Temple national spokeswoman Jex Blackmore proclaimed *The Witch* a Satanic feminist liberation film. Blackmore praises *The Witch* not only for not feeding into "victim narratives," but also for symbolizing resistance against patriarchal and religious oppression of female bodies. I too believe that *The Witch* represents a "declaration of feminine

independence.” (Sollee 47). To many, the death of Thomasin’s entire family and her entrance into witchcraft, or rather, her becoming a witch, seems terrifying. Yet my argument, in agreement with Blackmore, is that the progression of Thomasin’s character throughout *The Witch* is empowering to Thomasin, as well as to women and “others” in the audience viewing the simultaneous reconfiguration of who the film, and societies, true monsters are, mixed with the liberation of an unlikely heroine. Furthermore, the demonization of the archetype of the witch is reimagined and transformed, in that the witch exists as an anti-assimilatory, powerful, uncontrollable and fiercely independent force.

The Witch is a feminist satanic subversion of religion and patriarchy, and the narrative ultimately leads to Thomasin’s emancipation and liberation. However, major questions and themes can remain unacknowledged or unanswered if folklore, mythology, and religious studies are not woven into an analysis of the film. On the surface, the viewer sees family members killed off one by one as terrifying hags, gnarled nature, and Satan himself eliminate the family and seduce (some could even believe coerce) Thomasin into darkness, as signaled by the fact that she signs Black Phillip’s book and becomes an evil witch. Yet, examining religious and patriarchal themes from an analysis of this film reveals a far different plot, and reshapes who the actual monsters are. Specifically, I assert that the slow descent into madness that the isolated family experiences in this film at the hands of witchcraft and the supernatural occurred in tandem with, and due to, the complete breakdown of the religious and patriarchal symbolic order. My reading of Thomasin’s conclusion illustrates the liberation that occurs once the binds of oppression are dissolved and destroyed. Furthermore, in opposition to readings that would vilify witches and Satan as culturally-coded villains, I find feminist and subversive potential in these figures. .

My methodology for executing my examination of *The Witch* is as follows; I will first discuss the history of the archetype of the witch, and of Satan, through mythology, folklore, and religious conceptions. I will then analyze *The Witch* and highlight the specific subversive work this film does to shift and expand upon this archetype in an empowering way. Existing works by film theorists such as Creed, Clover, and Kristeva, to name a few, address theoretical elements of the monstrous feminine, the archetype of the witch, and the film itself. Lastly, I will discuss cultural receptions of *The Witch*, utilizing The Satanic Temple, and Jex Blackmore's, stance on the film, as this is an interpretation I both agree with and intend to expand upon. While Blackmore believes this film is an attack on patriarchal and religious oppression, I aim to expand upon this interpretation through analyzing the symbolism and tropes within the film, so as to lead to an even stronger incursion against theocratic patriarchy. I stand behind Blackmore's interpretation and summation of the film, and believe that this film becomes even richer with subversive and liberating tropes once the symbolism of this film is decoded. *The Witch* is not only a representation of rebellion and resistance, but also a framework for it.

I will also discuss the shift of *The Witch* as villain to icon in queer and feminist pop cultures. My analysis of the film will showcase these shifts, build upon existing works, and frame the archetype of *The Witch* as a transformative and important cultural figure. Weaving together historical and mythological conceptions of the witch archetype, current reclamations and conceptions of the witch archetype, and finally an analysis of the subversive and transformative plot of *The Witch*, I will display the witch as an emancipated and fearsome figure with subversive power.

BACKGROUND ON THE WITCH

For the purposes of this paper, I will mainly discuss the conceptualization and conflation of woman as Witch within the lexicon of Christianity and American history, as *The Witch* takes place in 17th century New England and centers around a Christian-extremist family. It is important to note, however, that the archetype of the Witch spans cultures, eras, tradition, folklore, and myth. She has been worshipped, sought after, idolized, and demonized throughout history, as “cunning folk” or healers, were sought out in the first millennium to aid with success or fortune in areas of life such as love and sex. The Witch is very much in existence today as well, as a liberator archetype, as an insult placed on women, and as an identity for many modern-day mystics that use witchcraft for empowerment and activism. As Bri Luna, the founder of the online community *The Hood Witch*, explains, being a witch is to “boldly and unapologetically embrace nature, heal yourself, and heal your community. To respect the seen and unseen realms...the freedom to be your most authentic self. To embrace all aspects of whoever that may be, and fiercely” (Sollee 18).

The introduction and conflation of religious ideology to the archetype of *The Witch* intrinsically linked Woman and the Devil. The conceptualization of the Witch as not only supernatural and fearsome, but also as demonic, can be seen through examination of religious myth, and particularly Lilith folklore.

Lilith was Adam’s first wife before Eve, and was created out of her own mound of dust and dirt, as was Adam. After Lilith refused to sexually submit to Adam and argued with him about who was to be on top during intercourse, Adam advanced upon her. Lilith invoked the magical name of God, flew into the air, and fled Eden for the Red Sea. Here, Lilith copulated

with creatures and demons and bore demonic offspring. God sent three angels to retrieve Lilith and bring her back to Eden for Adam, yet Lilith refused. The angels threatened that for each day Lilith did not return, they would kill one-hundred of her children. She was apathetic about this, and promised the angels that she would kill human newborns in return. And thus, Lilith's construction as a wild, untamable, demonic, non-maternal, aggressively sexual baby-killer was established. Lilith is not directly mentioned in the Bible, and her myth was primarily perpetuated through oral tradition and superstitions. However, a discrepancy between the creation of Man and Woman in Genesis 1:27 (“in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”) and Genesis 2:22 (“and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man”) creates the potential for two separate creation stories involving the creation of Adam’s wife, intimating Lilith’s existence.

Lilith did not only act as the foundation for the conception of a witch, but Lilith’s myth, in addition to the interpretation of Eve’s role in the Edenic myth, solidified the association of Woman and Satan. Per Faxneld’s work *Satanic Feminism* analyzes this connection. In Faxneld’s reading of Jules Michelet’s book *La Sorciere*, he frames the connection between Woman and Satan as one of subversive feminist liberation. Woman is framed as Satan’s chosen one, as it is to woman that Satan bestows “the fruit of science and of nature” (Faxneld 204).

Faxneld highlights that Michelet inverts traditional religious and gender conceptions in his book, referring to the Devil as “woman’s ally of old and her confidant in the Garden of Eden” (Faxneld 204). Michelet also describes witches in a very subversive way that defies traditional gendered understanding of Woman; Michelet states, “this witch, this monster who does everything against the grain, in direct contradiction to the realm of the sacred” (Faxneld 204).

Michelet is disrupting the Christian discourse of both Satan and women, by framing Satan as an ally rather than a patriarch, as an emancipator rather than ruler, and by framing Witch as “not a poisoner, but one who uses poison to heal” (Faxneld 204). Thus, the main point showcased in Michelet’s work is that Christianity established the light and the dark, the hero and the villain, the good and the evil, from the biblical beginning with the story of Creation. From the first pages of the bible and encoded within the Christian psyche, God, and man, are good, and Satan, and woman, are evil and dangerous.

The conflation of women and evil, and witches and the Devil, is important to note, especially when discussing the trope of the Witch within a historical Christian context. As Meir Bar-Ilan states, “the history of witchcraft...is in reality an inseparable chapter of the question of the status of women and the relationship between women and men in the ancient era” (Bar-Ilan 1). This conflation continues within the patriarchal symbolic order of modern day.

While Robert Egger’s film takes place in 17th century New England, the foundation of the association of women and witchcraft occurred in the 15th century, namely due to Dominican Heinrich Kramer and his canonical collection of misogynistic anti-witch work *Malleus Maleficarum*. Prior to the 15th century, magic and sorcery were not tied to a specific gender yet, as civilization moved into the 16th century, Woman as Witch was solidified. The dissertations of Dominican Girolamo Visconti showcase this, in which Visconti noted:

The teaching of God comes from God into Christ and from Christ into man and from man into woman...Instead, the teaching of the devil was transferred from the devil to woman, as in Genesis (Gen 3:1-6), because she had a lesser sensibility and ability of discernment, and then from woman it passed to man...this is what...I had in mind to say about witches. (Corsi 110)

Furthermore, the *Malleus Maleficarum* opens by condemning women for their lesser morality and their inherent evil nature and ties with the devil. It is apparent that this work was not just a manifesto against witches, but against women in general. This is made clear in excerpts such as “It is better not to marry. What else is a wife if not the enemy of friendship...the necessary evil, the natural temptation, the desirable calamity...the evil in nature, painted in bright colors?” (Corsi 112)

The foundational witch hunting literature of 15th century Europe aided in the hysteria and trials in Salem in the 17th century, as Salem picked up where the European Witch Hunts left off. Minister Cotton Mathers, a leader in the charge against witchcraft in Salem, stated “Tis the Whore that is clamorous.” His disdain for women went beyond the panic of witchcraft; it also intertwined female sexuality into the evil and impurity of Woman.

One way the Salem Witch Trials differed from the European view of witchcraft was in terms of female sexuality, namely sexual acts with the devil. In European art and records depicting the witch hunts, “carnal bacchanals were freely depicted” (Sollee 37). The sexualized female body, and demonic sexuality, were overt aspects of the European witch hunt discourse, myth, and accusations. In opposition to this explicitness, demonic sexualization was not a central nor overt component to the American witch hunt discourse. Beliefs of witches engaging in sexual activities, orgies, etc. with the devil were repressed and unspoken, similar to all other Puritanical notions regarding sexuality. Even when women were accused of witchcraft and coalition with the devil, the repressive ideas regarding sexuality that are central to the American psyche can be observed. The fear and unspeakableness of women engaging in sexuality — especially satanic sexuality — that is foundational to the American psyche is of utmost importance to note.

The trope of the Witch remained present in American cultural discourse post-Salem. The witch was a motif used by those against female emancipation, such as suffragettes, and this connection was intended, by the patriarchy, to showcase the social dangers of female liberation. However, ties between witchcraft, feminism, and women of American history can also be observed. For instance, Suffragette and organizer of the Seneca Falls Convention Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a practitioner of Spiritualism, a popular yet counter-culture belief of the 19th century that centered around séances and mediumship. Matilda Joslyn Gage was a suffragist and abolitionist who reclaimed the word “witch,” and was outspoken about patriarchal religion and gender inequality. To Gage, a witch was a “woman of superior knowledge” (Sollee 51) targeted by Christian powers due to the conflation of Church and State. Victoria Woodhull, a reproductive rights activist and the first woman to run for President of the United States, worked as a psychic and a medium.

In the 1960s, the culture wars and battles for civil rights breathed life into the revitalization of the witch as dissident, political, and empowering. W.I.T.C.H. — Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell — was established in New York City, with chapters eventually spreading across the states. W.I.T.C.H. would engage in activism, performance art, and other acts of resistance ranging from protests and public hexes to mailing “nail clippings and hair to a university that fired a radical feminist professor” (Sollee 53). This organization has resurfaced today as well in the wake of the current political climate and discourse in America. The Satanic Temple spokeswoman Jex Blackmore is a self-proclaimed witch, and is heavily involved in performative activism and fighting for reproductive rights today.

Robert Egger's film *The Witch* plays on historical religious tropes of the witch, the supernatural, and Satan, yet this film does not only function as a thoroughly researched and well-executed period piece. The archetype of the Witch has been consistently present throughout America's history, and is steadily making a cultural resurgence, both as a spiritual practice and as an identity of resistance, for modern day women, queers, persons of color, etc. Many of these communities are embracing a historically demonized and marginalized figure such as the Witch, and utilizing the terror and power that comes with this figure is an act of reclamation. As Sollee asserts, "I see a reclamation of female power in the witch, slut, and feminist identities" (Sollee 7). *The Witch* utilizes tropes of the Witch found in folktales and religious panic and showcases these tropes in a terrifying, yet subversive way. The ultimate subversion and liberation Thomasin achieves at the end of the film does not hold isolated relevance to 17th century New England; instead, it displays a kind of feminist liberation against hegemonic patriarchal oppression that is applicable to the resistance and liberation of the marginalized today.

THE WITCH: ANALYZING SYMBOL AND SUBVERSION

Horror films showcase "hopes and fears that contest dominant hierarchical relations of power" (Wee 152). The mainstream reception of Egger's *The Witch* showcases the phallocentric, Christian meaning making of the status quo that aligns women and the feminine with evil and monstrosity. This observation comes in two parts — first, the association between the Witch and Satan, and second, the conception of the two as evil. Before delving in to my analysis of *The Witch*, it is important to further examine the mainstream reception of the film in order to both

contest this conception and showcase the subversive imagery and power contained within this film that I believe the mainstream discourse to have missed.

Overall, I assert that the general opinion of this film, as expressed via online film forums, journal publications and reviews of *The Witch*, grossly misinterprets and dismisses the subversiveness of this film, as well as ignores the complexity of the symbolism, motif, folklore, and feminist notions in which the film is drenched. Furthermore, and perhaps most important to this analysis, the characters who are defended by the mainstream juxtaposed with those characters who are demonized showcase the positionality of spectators as viewing and interpreting this film within a patriarchal society and context. By this, I mean that the mainstream reception of the film showcases both a phallogentric and Christian lens of viewership — two components deeply embedded within the foundation of our cultural lexicon. That which is considered terrifying and abject in a horror film works within a patriarchal society — horror films showcase male fears of the female body and code the abject as feminine. The witch, in particular, is an abject figure, in that “she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order...The witch is also associated with a range of abject things: filth, decay, spiders, bats, cobwebs, brews, potions” (Creed 76).

Explaining Kristeva’s concept of abjection, Barbara Creed notes, “that which threatens to destroy life [the abject] also helps to defines life” (Creed 9). The abject status of woman, and woman’s reproductive functions, in the male imagination/patriarchy reinforces the notion of men as human and woman as non-human, thus objectified, demonized, and assaulted, both on and off the screen. Furthermore, Creed notes that woman’s association with monstrosity in popular discourses is “a function of the ideological project of the horror film — a project designed to

perpetuate the belief that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man's sexual other" (Creed 83). Contemporary portrayals of the witch in film tend to omit her role as healer and present her within the phallogentric Christian context of monstrous hag with fearsome powers.

No trope within Robert Egger's *The Witch* carries more importance and impact to the film than the trope of the Witch herself. Psychoanalyst Barbara Creed conceptualized the theory of what she refers to as the "monstrous-feminine" — a horror film trope that establishes a link between the feminine and evilness. In terms of the archetype of the witch in particular, Creed notes, "there is one incontestably monstrous role in the horror film that belongs to woman — that of the witch" (Creed 73). As previously discussed, the witch has historically and mythologically evoked feelings of awe and horror. In ancient times even prior to patriarchal and religious demonization, the figure of the witch, and her powers, inspired fear. Cultural fears of the trope of the Witch do not hinge upon whether her powers are conceived as good or evil, but rather from the fact that the Witch possesses supernatural powers at all. The supernatural is horrific because it breaks the boundaries established by our symbolic order; it cannot be controlled, understood, or contained. Similar to the supernatural, the Witch herself cannot be controlled — her image, however, can be demonized. Central to this film analysis is the examination of the ways in which the representation of figure of the witch is constructed by phallogentric, Christian influence. Specifically, the conflation of the Witch and primary Christian villain, Satan, is a primary tool of the demonization of the Witch.

The establishment of the Christian association between the Witch and Satan serves two functions; first, associating the Witch and Satan strips the Witch of innate power and magic. In

this conception, if a witch receives her powers as a gift from Satan after signing his book, agreeing to do his bidding, etc., the witch becomes less fearsome because her powers are not her own. Rather, said supernatural power comes from an external force. Second, said association creates an inverse symbolic order in which hegemonic patriarchy is still upheld; in framing Satan as master and witch as servant, these fearsome and uncontrollable women are pulled back into patriarchal positionality. Terrifying as she may be, the witch is still subservient to, and controlled by, a male figure. In crafting the witch as a figure whose powers were bestowed upon her, through demonic allegiance, rather than innate, and in framing the witch as servant and Satan as master, the witch is simultaneously stripped of autonomy and made to appear depraved and perverse.

The act of establishing the link between the monstrous with the feminine, as Creed states, is a tactic of the patriarchy to “perpetuate the belief that a woman’s monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man’s sexual other.” (Creed 83) With woman as “Other” and man as default, the survival of man hinges upon his successful abjection of qualities or traits deemed feminine. When male bodies become grotesque in horror films — covered in blood, stabbed, penetrated, etc. — they become feminized. In *The Witch*, several examples of masculinity being feminized and abject are apparent. In patriarchal cultures, the abject — that which is essentially the terrifying impurity that threatens the culturally established concept of the self — can be construed as what is interpreted as “the feminine;” menstrual blood, afterbirth, pregnancy, caverns or womb-like holes, penetration, etc. One of the aspects of horror films that makes them so visceral and impactful is their tendency to reveal anxieties regarding a breakdown in the ability to distinguish from the “self” and the “other” and repudiate against those things that

threaten life. Psychoanalytic literary critic Julia Kristeva defines the abject as that which does not “respect borders, positions, rules” and “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 4). The witch is an abject figure that dwells among abject things — bats, cobwebs, snakes, spiders, moss, dirt, decay, etc.

There is a specifically religious aspect to abjection that is relevant to this analysis; Kristeva notes that with the advent of Christ, the nature of the abject shifted. Prior to Christ, in the Old Testament, the feminine, specifically in relation to childbirth and menstruation, were unclean biblical abominations. With these aspects of the feminine established as abominations in a “symbolic order that excluded women” (Creed 41), the polluting object (woman) threatened the self (man) from the outside. Through Christ’s ministry, however, these abominations were dissolved — Christ had contact with lepers, defended and befriended sex workers and women, associated with pagans, etc. Through Christ, concept of pollution shifted from external to internal through the conception of “sin.” Kristeva states “the threat comes no longer from the outside, but from within (Kristeva 42). Furthermore, the rectification of sin becomes associated with the spoken word through the religious ritual of confession. Religion is therefore a means of purifying the abject, restoring the distinction between self and other. As overt themes of religious extremism are observed throughout the film, this aspect of Kristeva’s work is extremely relevant. Kristeva states, “For abjection... is the other facet of religious, moral, ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies. Such codes are abjections purification and repression” (Kristeva 209).

The abject imagery the viewers, and film characters, see relating to the supernatural in this film — specifically, a broken egg with a bloodied chick inside, blood instead of milk coming

from a goat's udder, a rotted apple being regurgitated out of Caleb's mouth before his death — is immediately countered with religious notions. Katherine sobs and prays for her missing infant Samuel, William makes Caleb pray out loud as they walk through the woods laying traps, and again Caleb prays out loud as he becomes lost in the woods, getting tangled in gnarled branches and eventually coming face to face with the witch of the wood. Prayer is not the only established and appropriate schema utilized to attempt to repudiate the encroaching abject; masculinity and discipline are showcased as well. Several instances throughout the film, at seemingly random moments, the camera will cut to a scene of William chopping wood obsessively. These cutaway scenes display William attempting to remain in control and enforce order, exerting strength and anger, trying to hold on to sanity. His performative masculinity attempts to uphold the patriarchal symbolic order that the witch, the abject, seeks to destroy.

THE WITCH AND WILDERNESS

A prominent trope within *The Witch* is the connection the film establishes, based off of folklore and myth, between the Witch and nature, wilderness, and earth. This is displayed in the film's discourse and framing of the woods, the animals and their interactions with the family, the fear expressed by family members in regards to the wilderness, and the linkage between imagery of nature, animals, and witches. Furthermore, the woods act as a threat to family members and to the religiosity and order family patriarch William attempts to maintain. From the beginning of the film, the forest, symbolic of the feminine, is established as the family's enemy; the impurity the woods represent elicits responses of repudiation, of turning away from.

The connections between the Witch and the woods, and the woods as the abject, is established in the beginning of the film. At 00:04:02, the camera lingers on a close-up of William kissing the ground. As he does so, the viewer sees flies flying around his face and the ground, clearly foreshadowing the death and decay to come. As William kneels back up and the camera pans out to first view William and Katherine, and then the entire family, joining hands while kneeling in prayer, the flies continue to swarm. The camera perspective, now behind the family, pans up and slowly zooms into the woods, holding focus on the trees as increasingly ominous music grows in volume, almost shrieking. Here, the viewer is locked into the woods, into nature, into the uncontrollable — the feminine.

Next, the family's plot of land is established and home, barn, and crops erected. Surrounded by wilderness, this solitary plot acts as a microcosm of law and order, of society, of religion and patriarchy. Shortly after the family establishes their land, Thomasin loses Samuel while taking care of him. She takes her infant brother to the edge of the family's farm, lays him on the ground, and plays peekaboo with him. The camera lens pans from Thomasin's face to Samuels at each "peekaboo" — at the fourth peekaboo, however, the lens holds still on Thomasin's bewildered and terrified face, panning then to an empty baby blanket. As Thomasin screams out for Samuel, viewers witness a cloaked figure — one of the witches of the wood — running through the woods with him. The scene that follows is a depiction of the witch making unguent from Samuel and using said ointment for a transvection ritual. Here, the audience witnesses such abject images as the witch grinding up Samuel, the mashing of his bones and squishing of his blood and organs audible. The spectator then views her lathering herself with the remnants; she is nude, her body pale, wrinkly, saggy, her hair coarse and long, her nails covered

in dirt. The witch here is the antithesis of cultural schemas established for Woman; the witch rejects motherhood, cleanliness, and youth. The witch then lies with her broom, covering it also in the unguent. The scene cuts, and the viewer witnesses a slow-motion accession of the witch flying on her broom towards a full moon, an image symbolically tied to both nature and to menstruation. In this scene, the witch is the anti-mother; she sacrifices Samuel instead of birthing him, she lathers his blood on her body instead of bleeding from within her body.

Abject imagery involving blood continue to pop up throughout the film, symbolically ensuring that fearsome imagery of and associations with the (monstrous) feminine remains in the spectator's consciousness. When Thomasin is feeling for eggs in the chicken's coop, she drops the one she finds on the ground, exposing a bloody and dead baby chick. This occurs after Samuel is kidnapped on her watch, symbolically confirming her connection to Samuel's death. As I will discuss later, Thomasin's potential as maternal and Mother was severed when she lost Samuel to the witch. Again, when Thomasin is milking one of the family's goats while being taunted by the twins, blood is expelled from the udder rather than milk. Thomasin kicks the milk bucket over in fear.

In a scene that infiltrates the woods with the masculine, William and Caleb enter the forest to go hunting. This scene is shrouded with deception, in that William took Caleb into the wood to search for food to lift the family's spirits, against Katherine's will. As Caleb notes, "You and mother have always forbade us to set foot in there." As William and Caleb are wandering through the wood, William makes Caleb recite a prayer — the line "my corrupt nature is empty of grace" is particularly poignant, in that the shame and repressiveness of the family's religiosity is highlighted. Caleb's reciting of prayer in the woods illustrates the attempt to bring God, and

order, into the ungodly, untamable wilderness. This scene in the woods is also the first time the viewers see the appearance of the hare that continues to appear throughout the film. William and Caleb are delighted to see the hare, and William aims his gun at it as the creature stares back defiantly. When William pulls the trigger, the ammunition backfires and strikes him instead.

Another pivotal nature scene is Caleb and Thomasin's entrance into the woods during nightfall, on the night they overhear their father, William, and mother, Katherine, discussing relinquishing Thomasin. The conversation is prompted as Katherine, in bed with William, states that God has cursed their family. William insists that God has taken the family to a "low condition" to humble them, yet Katherine disagrees and cries that they never should have left the plantation. In a moment of defensiveness and pride, William deflects this blame he receives onto the plantation's Church and takes a dig at Katherine for lamenting the disappearance of her silver cup -- which she blamed Thomasin for earlier that day during dinner. During the family's meal, Thomasin swears she did not touch or lose her mother's cup, and Katherine asks Thomasin "did a wolf vanish that too?" in direct reference to Samuel's disappearance. The mounting resentment Katherine holds for Thomasin is apparent, especially during her conversation with William to be rid of Thomasin. Katherine rebukes William when he accuses her of vanity, explaining to William that she is not upset for reasons of greed; rather, because they could have sold it. Only a fool, she says, would trade goods for the family's corn.

With the fear of starvation and the family's survival on the forefront of her mind, Katherine suddenly realizes the family has another good to offer trade for -- Thomasin. She then frantically tells William "our daughter hath begot the sign of her womanhood...she's old enough, she needs to leave to serve another family." It is not made explicitly clear whether Katherine is

suggesting selling or trading Thomasin for marriage or service, yet it is clear that Katherine views Thomasin as a burden to her potentially starving family and implores William to get rid of her. William responds “Kate, twas not her fault, I must tell thee,” seemingly about to confess to her that it was he who sold her silver cup. Katherine interrupts and blames him for the family’s hardship. She even suggests Caleb is old enough to secure an apprenticeship, to which William responds that they must keep Caleb still, and Thomasin. After Katherine’s continued sobs, William yields. In order to appease Katherine, shift blame from himself, and keep Caleb for the time being, William promises Katherine he will go to the village with the horse and Thomasin in the morning. He suggests “The Tildens or the Whytings, they can make use of her,” and the argument is over. The camera pans to Thomasin, crying silently looking betrayed and afraid, and Caleb, visibly upset at the thought of parting with his sister.

In an attempt to save his sister, Caleb decides to go into the wood in an attempt to check the traps laid for wild game to appease his parents. Thomasin insists on going with him, and the two of them depart along with the family’s horse and dog. The hare appears again, spooking the horse into running away and luring the family dog into a chase. Thomasin and Caleb become separated as Caleb runs after the dog and Thomasin eventually finds her way back to the family’s plot. Caleb becomes lost in the wood, deeper and deeper, and again, through his apparent fear and struggling against gnarled roots and moss and darkness, he recites:

O God my Lord, I now begin,
O help me and I'll leave my sin.
For I repentant now will be,
From evil I will turn to thee.
None ever shall destroy my faith,
Nor do I mind what Satan saith.
O God my Lord, I now begin,

O help me and I'll leave my sin –

Caleb's prayer is cut short at his discovery of the witches hut; as a voluptuous, pale, black-haired maiden emerges from the hut and locks eyes with Caleb, he loses his voice completely. What follows is the bewitching and slow death of Caleb. After this scene, the family does not enter the wood anymore; what follows is a slowly building satanic assault on the family and their land. As creatures and the supernatural surround and encroach upon the family, reaching the climactic destruction of the family unit at the end, it illustrates not only the victory of wilderness over order, but also of liberation over restriction, of the feminine over the masculine. In the final scene of the film, the woods are the site of the witches' sabbath being held, and Thomasin's ultimate and orgasmic liberation.

The undomesticated and wild animals of the wood are also associated with the witch and the monstrous. A recurring animal theme throughout the film is the hare - when the hare appears in the woods, it acted to taunt William, trick the family dog, and lead Caleb further astray in the woods and to the witches' hut. However, in one scene in which Thomasin is sent to tend to the goats during a dinner in which her mother would not stop berating her, the hare appears. Thomasin freezes when she sees the hare watching her, and the camera once again holds its gaze.

In numerous folk tales and witch lore, the hare is heavily associated with the witch. In some tales, the hare acts as a witches daemon — a demonic animal belonging to either the witch or to Satan that exists to aid witches in their evil deeds. In other pieces of folklore, witches were said to turn into hares; in Nordic myth, for instance, witches were thought to turn into hares to perform mischievous deeds such as stealing dairy. The symbolism of the hare as either being a witch or a witches daemon is noteworthy to this analysis insofar as I assert the supernatural

forces of witchcraft and nature were allied with, and intent on rescuing, Thomasin throughout the film. In fact, while the first half of the film consists of a slow buildup, the supernatural forces attack the family with full force once the decision to give Thomasin away into service or marriage is made by William and Katherine. Thomasin's fate to enter into her womanhood within the patriarchal symbolic order acted as a catalyst for demonic intervention and salvation.

Ultimately the greatest terror in this film is exhibited through the eventual domination of the family and the family's space, as the boundaries that the symbolic order attempts to maintain are dissolved. In the beginning of the film, the witch seemed confined to the wood, among the dirt and moss and wildlife; the boundary was existent, and the family felt safe, in that they were not even aware of the witch's existence. Slowly, the supernatural crept in, the rules became broken, and each family member but Thomasin eventually succumbed to death, becoming what Kristeva notes as the most abject image of all: corpses.

The final scene of the film takes place in the woods; as this is Thomasin's final initiation into becoming a witch, it is apt to take place in the untamable, uncontrollable, unyielding wood. Thomasin walks naked into the woods with Black Phillip, after signing his book (which signifies her severance from patriarchy) and, as is suggested, copulating with Black Phillip (establishing her autonomous sexuality). The deeper Thomasin walks into the woods, the louder the viewer hears guttural screaming and chanting in unintelligible language. The sound is visceral, gurgling, choking, laughing, shrieking. She comes upon a group of witches banging the ground and writhing and dancing around a fire, each individual witch slowly beginning to levitate. Covered in her mother's blood, Thomasin looks around in awe until she herself slowly

begins to transvect, prompting her to laugh wildly and orgasmically, tilting her head back in disbelief and experiencing complete ecstasy.

THE MONSTROUS & MOTHERHOOD

Creed describes the archetype of the witch as “an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order...The witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary” (Creed 76). Thus the monstrosity of the witch is inherently sexual, supernatural, and close to nature and the earth. Creed notes that women’s monstrosity and maternal and reproductive functions are also linked. These concepts are showcased within several themes in *The Witch* — Thomasin’s onset of puberty occurs in tandem with the supernatural occurrences surrounding the family in the woods, seeping through. Furthermore, as discussed, Thomasin fails as a maternal figure to her infant brother Samuel when he is kidnapped. This marks a shift in the family’s dynamic in which her mother Katherine becomes increasingly cold to and suspicious of Thomasin. Thomasin also kills her mother in the end of the film; these plot points severing both her relationship with her mother and the symbolic possibility of her ever becoming a mother herself.

Samuel’s disappearance affects the other members of the family as well, solidifying their characters for the rest of the film. While Katherine mourns the loss of her son inconsolably, fixating on his unbaptized status and constantly praying for his soul’s salvation, William is seemingly unfeeling and insensitive. When walking through the woods with Caleb to hunt for food, Caleb is clearly distraught about both his younger brother’s disappearance and fate. He begins asking his father questions of faith, pleading William to tell him if Samuel is in hell, and

if Caleb himself will go to hell when he dies. William loses patience, yells at Caleb, and then explains “Fain would I tell thee Sam sleeps in Jesus, that thou wilt, that I will, but I cannot tell thee that. None can.” (00:16:40). Lastly, the twins, Jonas and Mercy, begin conferring with the family’s goat, Black Phillip. In a later scene in which Thomasin and Caleb are doing chores by the brook, Mercy jumps out of the brush, impersonating a witch she insists lives in the woods, and claims Black Phillip told her that a witch, not a wolf, took Samuel. Thus, following Samuel’s disappearance, the characters, and their interacting dynamics, are cemented. Thomasin bears the burden of guilt and Katherine’s rage, William is exposed as evangelical and unyielding, Caleb is full of religious fear and shame, and the twins are granted insight into the surrounding supernatural.

Katherine’s resentment towards Thomasin for losing Samuel only grows when Katherine is unable to locate her silver cup — a beloved heirloom gifted to her from her father. During a family dinner, Katherine begins to chastise Thomasin over the whereabouts of her silver cup; as Thomasin repeatedly assures her mother she has not touched the silver cup, Katherine chides “did a wolf vanish that too?” (00:28:43). The loathing Katherine has for Thomasin is apparent to the viewer, and that night Katherine explains to William that she is not upset about her silver cup’s disappearance for vanity, but rather, because the family could have sold it. Katherine then exclaims to William that Thomasin has “begat the signs of her womanhood,” (00:33:00), and that she is old enough to go serve another family. While William pushes back that he and Katherine need all the working hands they have, Katherine asserts that they have too many mouths to feed, and the family will starve. Selling Thomasin is Katherine’s solution to both ensuring the survival

of the family and ridding the farm of the daughter she detests, and is a viable option due to Thomasin's budding sexuality and womanhood.

As Katherine thinks of her missing silver cup, she immediately connects Thomasin and her pubescent body. This silver cup was a gift to her from her father when she was a girl, and so it becomes apparent to the viewer that the silver cup is inextricably tied with youth. Katherine's resentment towards Thomasin is twofold; she is envious of Thomasin's youth in the face of her own youth vanished, and she blames Thomasin for the disappearance of Samuel, a blow to Katherine's maternal identity. It is important to note that while Thomasin is the only member of the family to survive at the end of the film, her mother is the last family member to die. Furthermore, Katherine dies at Thomasin's hand. Thomasin is caught between a juxtaposition of aligning with her mother — and everything Katherine represents — or destroying her mother.

Katherine is the embodiment of exaggerated Puritanical and early seventeenth-century standards of womanhood. Katherine reveres both God and William; she is pious, she concedes, and she is a faithful and willing subordinate to both. Historian Carol F. Karlsen notes that Puritanical beliefs mandated that women serve men, and thus serve God. To earn favor with God, women not only had to succeed in serving earthly patriarchs, they also had to “acknowledge this service as their calling, and believe they were created for this purpose” (Karlsen 166). Yet, Katherine is not exempt from sin, namely wrath — her suspicion of and contempt for Thomasin becomes increasingly uncontainable until the final scene between the two women.

The only two family members left, Katherine is enraged and screaming at Thomasin for having the Devil in her. Katherine blames Thomasin for the family's fate, and begins hitting her while Thomasin cries and tries to reason with her mother. After a scuffle ensues, Thomasin

falls to the ground and Katherine continues to beat Thomasin while Thomasin repeatedly shouts “I love you.” Thomasin’s desire to be a child is denied as Katherine continues to beat her and, in self-defense, Thomasin reaches for a gardening tool and hits her mother in the head. Blood drips from Katherine’s forehead onto Thomasin’s face and neck. Now completely crazed, Katherine begins to strangle Thomasin, and right before choking to death, Thomasin delivers several powerful blows to Katherine’s skull. Thomasin, sobbing and covered in her mother’s blood, holds Katherine’s corpse. As previously mentioned, the corpse is the ultimate abject image — in this scene, Thomasin’s cradling of her mother’s corpse represents the final severance of herself and Mother, and her final movement from child to woman. In an even less symbolic reading, this scene represents Thomasin’s final stand against the scapegoating and demonization her family, mainly Katherine, projected onto her.

SEXUALITY & THE MALE GAZE

Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey describes women's role in film, within a patriarchal culture, as functioning to be coded as the male “other.” In looking, or gazing, the male eye is active while the female body is passive; women are the bearers of meaning, not the makers of meaning. As Mulvey states, in a culture “ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 10). The male gaze lands on the woman, decoding her meaning and evaluating her “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 10).

In *The Witch*, a two-fold male gaze can be observed several times throughout the film as Thomasin’s pubescent, budding body is gazed at by both the audience and by her brother. In moments in which her growing breasts peak out from her dress, or their shape is apparent, the

viewer experiences lingering frames or slow camera zooms in which the spectator gazes both at Thomasin, as well as at Caleb gazing at Thomasin's figure. The curiosity and lust can be read on Caleb's face, and can be felt from the audience. In both occurrences of this lustful gaze, Caleb looks away out of fear of getting caught by Thomasin; of course, the shame implicitly tied to sexuality, and women, instilled by Christian religion is at play here. Yet, so is another abject horror of the film — incest. The intersection of sexuality as both repressive and perverse, with incestuous lust as disordered interacts with Thomasin in an oppressive way. Her budding sexuality is both the cause for her parents to wish to sell her, and for her brother to lustfully leer at her. Especially through Caleb's gaze upon Thomasin, the viewer is implicated. In these instances, Thomasin is gazed at as "erotic object" both within the film and outside of the film, by spectators in the audience.

A hugely symbolic subversion this film illustrates is that of Caleb's demise. Death befalls him after he is seduced and then cursed by a voluptuous witch, in a scene in which the lustful yet repressed male gaze that previously landed upon Thomasin turns into terror. Essentially, the male gaze is inverted back onto Caleb by the witch; the witch's gaze proving deadly. In the scene in which Caleb comes face to face with the witch of the wood, Caleb becomes unable to look away. As previously stated, he loses the ability to continue the prayers he was muttering under his breath after becoming completely locked into the witch's gaze. As Caleb looks at her with terror, the witch slowly advances. She pulls him in to a kiss and, before the scene quickly cuts out, the viewer sees her claw-like, wrinkled hag's hand grasp Caleb's head as their lips meet.

An additional aspect of importance within this scene of the witch seducing Caleb, as he represents a surrogate for Man, is that it illustrates her rendering him powerless, symbolically

castrating him and stripping him of sexual power or prowess. Bolstering this assertion, Caleb returns to the family plot a day later in the darkness of night, naked and disoriented. The witch penetrated Caleb with a curse, overtaking his body, mind, and the viewer may assume, soul. Caleb is further feminized once he is placed into bed and Katherine attempts to treat him by making an incision over his temple to bleed out his sickness. Not only is blood connected with the feminine and the abject, but the penetration of the incision is also feminizing. Furthermore, wounds signify the abject as well, in that they disrupt the boundary between the inside and the outside of the body, and are feminized as they “point to woman’s reproductive functions and her alliance with the world of nature” (Creed 82-83). The symbolic penetration of Caleb occurs once more right before his hallucinatory and oddly orgasmic death scene; as he is convulsing, Caleb shoots up with his jaw locked, seemingly choking. When William pries open his jaw, a rotted, bloodied apple is ejected from his mouth, emerging from within Caleb instead of existing outside of his body — another abject image. The decayed apple is also, in my opinion, a nod to the Edenic myth found in Genesis 3, in which Eve eats of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Through Christian discourse, this biblical myth has been wielded to validate and maintain female subjugation; the Christian belief that Eve caused humanity to be banished from Eden and suffer sparked a strain of sexism that has continued long into modern day. Eve was susceptible to Satan, just as Thomasin was believed to be by her family following Caleb’s death.

As the audience bears witness to Caleb’s slow, hallucinatory death, viewers realize they too are locked into Caleb’s gaze upon the witch. Caleb’s inability to break away from the lustful, hungry gaze the witch cast upon him led to his ultimate demise; first the camera lens aligns with Caleb’s view, gazing upon the witch and meeting her ravenous eyes; the audience meets this

stare as well, unable or unwilling to look away. Second, the camera lens aligns with the view of the witch, focusing on Caleb's quivering, fearful face. The witch is calm, smug, and sexual as she draws an increasingly terrified Caleb right up to her. As psychoanalytic horror film theorist Barbara Creed states:

In films where the male is the victim of the monstrous-feminine in one of her many guises...the male spectator, who identifies with his on-screen surrogate, is clearly placed in a powerless situation. Through the figure of the monstrous-feminine, the horror film plays on his possible fears of menstrual blood, incorporation, domination, castration, and death (Creed 155).

Creed's assertion that the male spectator is placed in a position of powerlessness and horror at the violence committed against his surrogate is useful for understanding the subversive powers of this film, especially in regards to disrupting the active male gaze within the film and by spectators. Mulvey notes that when male spectators align or identify themselves with a male main character in film, they are able to "participat[e] in his power" and "indirectly possess" the onscreen erotic object as well. Yet, in this film, the witch uses Caleb's gaze against him — locking Caleb into a position of powerlessness and fear — and preys upon his gaze. In combining both Mulvey and Creed's concepts, I assert that, through aligning with Caleb only to then be forced to witness his torturous death, the male spectator witnesses Caleb's punishment for a gaze he also participated in. Ultimately, the male gaze placed onto Thomasin by the audience is then punished and rectified by the witch. Furthermore, Caleb's incestuous gaze at Thomasin renders her passive; Thomasin is the ignorant receiver of Caleb's lust. The witch, however, has a clear command of the power of a look, and the power of hungry, uninhibited sexuality. Caleb is literally bewitched by her, and becomes the subject of her gaze — a deadly positionality for Caleb. This scene is a pivotal moment of subversion against the patriarchal

power showcased in the film thus far. The scene takes place in the woods, which is coded dangerous, ungodly, and feminine; Caleb is then emasculated and frozen by the witches gaze, and penetrated by her curse through sexual contact. The scene brings chaos, sexuality, and the feminine to religiosity, law, and order, and Caleb's body is the battleground upon which the subversion of patriarchy takes place.

BLACK PHILLIP: A SATANIC FEMINIST

The family's goat, a dark-haired beast with a piercing gaze and giant horns — aptly named Black Phillip — is another central, and demonic, character in *The Witch*. First, it is important to note that Black Phillip is, as gathered via numerous symbolic clues throughout the film, Satan. Starting at 00:18:50, the twins are seen chasing Black Phillip around the plot singing a song in his honor. A line from this song is as follows: “Black Phillip, Black Phillip, we are your servants, we are ye men. Black Phillip is the lion from the lion's den.” This reference to Black Phillip as the lion correlates to biblical verse 1 Peter 5:8, “Be sober-minded and alert. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” Furthermore, representations of the Devil as a He-Goat, and tales and paintings of witches dancing with, worshiping, and riding goats are numerous. Black Phillip as Satan is also intimated by Mercy, who is able to communicate with Black Phillip throughout the film, when she taunts Thomasin, “Black Phillip said I can do what I like.” This aligns Black Phillip in opposition to both William and the Lord William expects that family to fear in the freedom and lawlessness Black Phillip advocates.

An important piece of symbolism Black Phillip adds to the film, besides his identity as Satan hiding among the devout family, are his horns. Horns are, of course, a main piece of imagery associated with the Devil. However, horns are also associated with fertility, the crescent moon, menstruation, and the feminine, further connecting Satan and witches. Per Faxneld states: “Horns of the Devil signify not only his power, but his associations with death and the underworld, and an uncontrolled, destructive sexuality” (Faxneld 70).

Two juxtaposing scenes involving Black Phillips horns are central to one of the main subversive message of this film — the victory of freedom over patriarchy and restriction. At 19:50, when William returns from the woods with Caleb, he sees the twins chasing Black Phillip, who is agitated and bucking. William struggles to wrestle the beast back into his pen, grabbing him by the horns and eventually forcing him back into his enclosure. Towards the end of the film at 1:15:15, William emerges from the family’s house presumably to free Thomasin and the twins from the barn he boarded them up in the night before. Instead, he walks out to see a destroyed barn, disemboweled goats, and a passed out Thomasin. As William’s gaze is locked in on the destruction and terror caused by the witch the night prior, Black Phillip charges at him and spears him in the abdomen with those same horns William grabbed him by previously. As William bends over in pain, reaching for an axe and glaring defiantly at Black Phillip, the goat then charges and bucks William into the massive pile of chopped wood he had accumulated throughout the film by his incessant and desperate performance of masculinity. The symbolic order of hegemonic and patriarchal theocracy comes toppling down, crushing him under its weight.

These two horn scenes showcase the patriarchal symbolic order seeing the emergence of freedom, sexuality, and, I would argue, feminine power, and responding to this emergence by violently stifling and forcing it into submission. Secondly, the horn trope displays the untamable force that is liberation and sexuality; William is killed by that which he attempted to eradicate. William's death acts as a break in his masculinity and power. The satanic subversion of patriarchy and Christianity is embodied within Black Phillip, aka Satan. Again, the juxtaposition of knowledge versus religious callowness is displayed; just as the apple that emerged from Caleb's mouth was a nod to the Edenic myth and a counter-reading of Eve and Satan as bringers of gnosis, the penetration of Black Phillip's horns into William's abdomen represent the same type of might. William tried, throughout the film, to maintain religious order and repudiate the supernatural, refuse reason, and remain rooted in his ignorance — his wrestling of Black Phillip into his confinement displays this. In the end, however, these tenets were defeated by Black Phillip, thus everything Black Phillip represents — freedom, liberation, knowledge, and subversion — were proven to be untamed and uncontrollable, eventually winning out in the end.

Creed upholds that the abject and terror that makes the female monster so scary in the horror film is that abject which is directly tied to woman's maternity and reproductive functioning. As discussed, Thomasin losing her baby brother to the witch of the wood symbolically disconnects her from her maternal side. Furthermore, her parents' discussion of sending her off to another family, mixed with her brothers repressed lust for her and her budding curves suggested menarche, thus womanhood, was approaching. After William's death, the only two family members left are Thomasin and her mother, Katherine, who represents the kind of woman the patriarchal symbolic order demands. Thus, Katherine is a symbol of repressed

womanhood and the binds of patriarchy, the last bound from which Thomasin must sever herself. Katherine, the family's matriarch, functioned as an arm of William and the patriarchy. She is a monstrous mother, both a split from Thomasin as well as a part of Thomasin that is destroyed with Katherine's death. Katherine's resentment of Thomasin is the symbolic resentment of Thomasin's youth, her sexualized body, her budding womanhood, her maternal pre-destiny yet failure. With the family's patriarch and matriarch destroyed at the hands (and horns) of Black Phillip and Thomasin, Thomasin subverts both her literal family unit as well as the symbolic cultural patriarchy.

THOMASIN AS WITCH: INITIATION AND LIBERATION

In one of the final scenes, Thomasin seeks out Black Phillip and invokes him to speak to her. Black Phillip remains silent, only speaking once Thomasin is about to turn away. Black Phillip asks Thomasin what she wants, and in return, Thomasin asks him what he can give. Black Phillip then delivers his wickedly delicious monologue, offering Thomasin a life of freedom and pleasure:

Wouldst thou like the taste of butter?
A pretty dress?
Wouldst thou like to live deliciously?
... Wouldst thou like to see the world?

While this film subverts which characters could be reframed as monstrous in the mortal realm, in this moment there are spiritual implications and subversions to be noted as well. To return to the discussion of the Edenic myth — the foundational lore within the human lexicon that solidified the connection of Woman and (D)evil — recall God's promise to Adam versus Satan's promise

to Eve. God explained to Adam that if Adam ate of the tree the knowledge of good and evil, he would die. The serpent, on the other hand, assured Eve that she would not, but rather told her that her eyes would be opened, she would become godlike herself and gain knowledge. When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit, they did not, in fact, die. As Faxneld notes, it appears through this myth that God lied to Adam, yet Satan kept his promise. Thomasin puts her faith in Black Phillip to keep his offer of freedom rather than a God who never showed himself. In the beginning of the film, Thomasin prays to God, begging him to show her mercy, and “light”. In the end, it is Satan — or Lucifer, the morning star— who shows Thomasin light.

Following, Black Phillip asks Thomasin to sign his book; Thomasin hesitates, stating that she cannot write her name. Black Phillip replies “I shall guide thy hand.” The viewer then witnesses her disrobe and, for a moment in the frame, the viewer sees that Black Phillip has transformed from a goat into a man, entering the frame behind Thomasin, putting a leather-gloved hand on her shoulder before the scene quickly cuts out.

Upon my initial viewing, I took this scene to showcase the positionality of director Robert Eggers as a heterosexual-cis white man — here Eggers seemingly reinforces problematic notions of man as creator, savior, and maker of meaning, and woman as the created, the saved, the bearer of meaning. It seemed to me that by casting a male-coded Satan and intimating copulation occurring between he and Thomasin, Eggers missed an opportunity to reach a truly subversive potential of this scene and of the film’s ending. This scene showcased, to me, Satan as the inverse of God, with hegemonic patriarchal power structures being replicated, and ownership of Thomasin’s body and soul being transferred from one patriarch (God/William) to another (Satan/Black Phillip). However, upon further analysis, I would disagree with this initial reading.

First, it is essential to examine the gender markers of Black Phillip as a man within the scope of 1630s puritanical New England. To a 21st century viewer, Black Phillip's human form is coded masculine by his facial hair and dress — however, the presentation of his human form within the context of the 17th century is much more complex. Black Phillip's human dress is flashy, luxurious, immodest — he is covered in gold, jewelry, leather, and fine materials — the antithesis of Puritanical modesty. In contrast to William, and in contrast to the men of the plantation observed in the film's opening scene, Black Phillip's attire seems not only immodest but also positions him as emasculated and queered. This portrayal of Black Phillip/Satan alone is subversive in that his presentation is queered beyond what standard codes of masculinity during this era would have allowed.

Second, the intimation that Thomasin and Black Phillip fornicated may seem reductive and almost tacky to a modern-day viewer within a 21st century context, yet again the reading of this scene within the context of 17th century Puritanism is crucial. As previously stated, the Witch Trials that occurred in Salem differentiated from the European Witch Hunts in one pivotal way — the folklore of carnal, bestial acts of sexuality between witches and the Devil. While European witch discourse was obsessed with sexualizing the female body, discussing or conceptualizing such acts was too depraved for the sexually repressed puritanical New England; notions of witches signing Satan's book or witches' familiars suckling upon witches bodies were obscene enough. Therefore, within this context, suggested copulation between Thomas and Black Phillip takes on a powerfully rebellious meaning against the repressive notions of sexuality held at the time. Throughout the film, a sub-theme of Thomasin's budding womanhood and sexuality is present. As previously discussed, the slow buildup of supernatural infiltration the

family experienced reached a stark increase and climax once William and Katherine planned to sell Thomasin, which was directly implicated by her womanhood and sexuality. This sexuality, however, was owned not by Thomasin, but by her parents and her Lord. In engaging in sexual activity with Black Phillip, this ownership is subverted, and several symbolic implications are achieved. First, in a context in which sexuality is forbidden and repressed, Thomasin commits an act of rebellion against the harsh and restrictive world in which she had been trapped. Much like the Lilith myth, Thomasin engages in forbidden sexuality on her terms — she forms an alliance with Black Phillip, excited by the thought of freedom, of travel, of living deliciously, and connects with the carnal desire that had been attempted to be contained and squelched. It is no wonder that in the closing scene, Thomasin laughs wildly, almost orgasmically, as she levitates.

The final scene of *The Witch* showcases Thomasin's initiation and liberation. Thomasin, followed by Black Phillip, walks into the woods naked, literally and figuratively unbound with any trappings of the material world, the patriarchal world, the world she is leaving. The viewer hears chanting in an unintelligible language composed of screams, shouts, guttural noises. Thomasin approaches a gathering of naked women around a fire banging on the ground, convulsing, dancing. Their bodies are covered in blood, which the viewers can assume is the blood of the twins, Jonas and Mercy, who were missing from the destroyed shed that same morning. As the bodies of the witches writhe around the fire, shaking, screaming, and growling, they are unintelligible -- perhaps even terrifying -- to the viewer, but not to Thomasin. She stands before them unafraid, because the monstrosity that is the liberated and carnal feminine is no longer fearsome to her. Helena Cixous asks women to "return from afar, from always: from 'without,' from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond

‘culture’” (Cixous 877). Thomasin represents this return; before the film cuts to black and the credits roll, the camera pans to Thomasin’s still body, legs together and arms spread outstretched. The positioning of Thomasin’s body resembles that of Jesus on the cross, the second coming of woman, symbolically dead and reborn, a witch.

Creed notes that within a patriarchal society, the monstrous-feminine exists to showcase male fears rather than female sexualization or subjectivity. Thomasin ultimately subverts the patriarchal familial and societal structures of oppression she was forced to exist within; with the family’s patriarch dead, and her relationship with God terminated after signing Black Phillip’s book, her patriarchs no longer own her. With her mother dead, the symbol of the womanhood she is expected to embody by said patriarchy is also destroyed. Black Phillip, the witches, and the supernatural and satanic forces she joins are not the inverses of Christianity nor patriarchy. Rather, they are uncontrollable, sexual, liberated entities that oppose the patriarchy enough not to mirror it with similar power structures, but rather subvert it with no power structures. Thomasin levitating in the air is the ultimate liberation and transcendence from patriarchal power structures and oppression.

Theorist Elisabeth Bronfen states in her work that the death of a monster is a tool used to eradicate or invalidate the monstrous feminine, killing off that which threatens the patriarchal order. She states “It is over her dead body that cultural norms are reconfirmed or secured... because a sacrifice of the dangerous woman re-establishes an order that was momentarily suspended due to her presence” (Bronfen 181). The ending of *The Witch* deconstructs and destroys said cultural norms, in that Thomasin is monstrous yet survives; she is a threat to patriarchal symbolic order that does not die.

CLOVER AND AUDIENCE ALIGNMENT

In feminist film scholar Carol Clover's canonical work *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, she discusses the stereotypical gender politics played out within horror films. Clover describes the male monster/slasher and the "Final Girl," the woman who survives abuse or torture or being hunted, and either escapes or is able to kill the male monster. The Final Girl is an important figure in that she stares the abject — death, torture, pain, monstrosity — in the face and has the strength or brains to overcome. The Final Girl is important, Clover notes, because the set-up aligns the audience, regardless of spectator-gender, with a female protagonist. As seen through the works of Mulvey, masculinist spectator alignment, sexualization of female characters, and the male gaze are the typical modes of film; the Final Girl in horror subverts that tradition.

In *The Witch*, Thomasin as the "Final Girl" contains an interesting twist, in that the insidious forces that kill, or influence the killing of, her family members one by one, don't wish to harm her at all. Rather, after her entire family is either dead or disappeared, Thomasin seeks out Black Phillip and invokes him to speak to her. At Black Phillip's invitation, Thomasin chooses to join these very forces and become a witch. To the family, the figures of the devil and the monstrous hag are the monsters; to Thomasin, her family is monstrous. Her mother blames her for the disappearance of Sam, her brother Caleb sexualizes her with his glances at her growing chest, her twin siblings taunt her, and her father both uses her as a scapegoat and prepares to take her to a nearby village and relinquish her to another family, at Katherine's insistence.

Thomasin as the Final Girl has interesting implications for the audience as well. In the beginning of the movie, the family is established as the main focus of the film, with patriarch William seemingly the main character. Spectator alignment with William would be in keeping with stereotypical self-identifications with film characters, especially from male viewers. However, as the story line shifts and develops, so does spectator alignment. If, in the end, the audience is aligned with Thomasin, they have effectively aligned themselves with an intensely vilified “other,” as opposed to remaining within the hegemonic status quo and aligning themselves with the family, the religious, and the pure. Thomasin comes to represent female liberation and sexual awakening, an embracing of the mystical and unnatural, a rejection of social confines, a break in the bounds of the patriarchy, an unshackling of the chains of religious oppression. Thomasin as the Final Girl establishes her as the heroine of the story; at the same time, Thomasin as a levitating witch covered in the blood of her mother postures her, in any other context, as the monstrous-feminine. This clash results in the enmeshment of the vilified and the valorized feminine, blurring the lines and subverting binaries of woman as nurturer—destroyer, angel—demon, virgin—whore, mother—monster. Furthermore, the ultimate spectator alignment with Thomasin as heroine, allied with other witches and Black Phillip (i.e. Satan), constructs the opposing characters — William, the family, God — as the true villains. The family’s patriarch, William, removed his family from society and their plantation to live isolated in the woods. The crops he planted failed, the traps he set in the woods were unsuccessful, he sold Katherine’s cup behind her back and let Thomasin take the blame, and his pride was his downfall. Katherine was cold and vengeful to Thomasin, Caleb was lustful of Thomasin, and the twins tormented and teased her incessantly, even framing her as the culprit responsible for

William and Katherine's beloved Caleb's death. Furthermore, the family's move into the wilderness to begin with was due to William's belief that the plantation was full of false Christians — behind all of William's actions is scripture, law and order, and blind, militant faith to God, and a sense of divine righteousness. William, and God, are representative of hegemonic patriarchy within the film, and observed by the audience as so; thus *The Witch* acts to subvert both a typical audience alignment and the patriarchy itself.

CONCLUSION

In the online culture blog Den of Geek, bloggers wonder how Thomasin, a “good Christian girl,” would succumb, “body and soul,” to the Devil after watching her entire family be slaughtered by witches and other forces of evil (Crow 4). They refer to the ending of *The Witch* as a “queasily tragic outcome” in a film that was a “perverse nightmare” (Crow 5). By their analysis, this film is a horror movie showcasing stereotypical monsters tricking and killing humans, recruiting one for their dark forces. Marketing for *The Witch* intimated similar notions, framing Thomasin, the witches, and Black Phillip as the villains, as seen in this promotional poster which reads “Evil takes many forms.”

However, this interpretation is problematic not only in that it misses the symbolic messages and subversive power of this film, but primarily in so far as it depicts the exact tenants and patriarchal symbolic order that this film fights against, that Thomasin escapes and the witches transcend. The film re-imagines the archetype of the witch without taming or softening the trope. The witch is still represented as dirty, wrinkly, scary, hungry, terrifying — yet liberated, sovereign, and free. Thomasin's initiation into becoming a witch herself fulfills a call

made by Cixous, for women to come back from always. Just as Lilith levitated after invoking the powerful and secret name of God and escaping the Garden of Eden, Thomasin too transvected after being severed from her oppressive, evangelical material life.

As previously stated, *The Witch* received a public endorsement from The Satanic Temple, which referred to the film as “a Satanic experience.” In a letter addressed to the Satanic community and general public, TST spokeswoman Jex Blackmore states: “*The Witch* is more than a film; it is a transformative Satanic experience that, in its call to arms, becomes an act of spiritual sabotage and liberation from the oppressive traditions of our forefathers” (Blackmore, 5). To the Satanic Temple, Satan is a figure that represents “defiance, independence, wisdom and self-empowerment” (Blackmore 2) — in this conceptualization, Satan would then be an ally and liberator to those oppressed by hegemonic powers that prevent access to such tenets. Thus, The Satanic Temple’s reception of this film would align with my primary assertion that Black Phillip and the witches are, in fact, the film’s protagonists aiding in the salvation of *The Witch*’s heroine Thomasin. Furthermore, *The Witch* expresses messages that The Satanic Temple is founded upon — it showcases a microcosm of “patriarchal theocratic society” within the family, and the ultimate destruction of said patriarchy. Patriarchal society strives to contain the feminine and dictate to women their role in society so as to benefit men and the institutions of patriarchy itself. As Blackmore comments, “Efforts to oppress and demonize the heretic prove to be a path to destruction. The witch does not burn but rises up in the night” (Blackmore 4). The figure of the witch, both in the film and in the material world, is fearsome because she cannot be contained, controlled, or dominated.

The Witch confuses and re-works spectator alignment, conceptualizations of monstrosity, and subverts the patriarchy overall. The traditionally demonized archetypes in this film are provided a platform, via Thomasin as the Final Girl, to be re-conceptualized, and the patriarchal gaze of the spectator is challenged. *The Witch* engages in feminist work to challenge schemas and motifs that have been constructed by a masculinist discourse existing within a patriarchal cultural structure. The viewer, forced to soak up this subversion through the act of observing *The Witch*, is then inundated, whether consciously or subconsciously, with a re-structuring of who, or what, is truly monstrous. As Thomasin levitates over a roaring fire, the patriarchy is dismantled in blood and flames.

To conclude, I turn again to Lilith, the cultural lexicon's first "witch," a demonized woman, a monster in folklore and myth. In re-tracing the transformation of the myth of Lilith through time, her etymological root is "lil." Not yet tarnished or demonized by patriarchal forces interested in maintaining male domination and severing women from developing fierceness and defiance, Lilith was untouchable, unruly, unchained by patriarchal tales; the Sumerian word for "wind." As Thomasin's body levitates into the air -- the element that Lilith is associated with -- she is both embraced with, and the embodiment of, the cosmic, uncontrollable, terrifying power that is the witch.

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